Legacy of Abuse

December 4, 2017 By Kate Ferguson

Despite continuing protests and cries for removal of the bronze and granite statue that honors James Marion Sims, MD, the monument still stands, overlooking El Barrio, a predominantly Hispanic and African-American neighborhood in New York City. For the past few years, local politicians and community advocates have challenged the appropriateness of paying tribute to Sims, who conducted a series of brutal experiments on Black slave women, reportedly operating on them without their informed consent—and without anesthesia.

Based on Sims's letters, some scholars argue that he secured the women's consent, but others strongly disagree. Sims struck bargains with slave owners to give him slaves who needed medical care and used them for his experiments. These men, women and, occasionally, children would have been forced to do their masters' bidding, as slaves weren't allowed to refuse. (In some articles, the doctor is said to have conducted surgery on white women without anesthesia too, but a number of scholars dispute that claim.)

Dubbed the "father of American gynecology," Sims perfected a technique for treating vesicovaginal fistulas. These ruptures of the wall separating the bladder from the vagina can occur during labor and result in a hole in the organ that allows waste to pass through. Historians lauded Sims for this medical breakthrough and other improvements in women's reproductive care that doctors today still use. (Later, he served a term as president of the American Medical Association.)

Many say Sims's methods tarnish these achievements. Some scholars cite Sims's erroneous belief, held by many other 19th- century physicians, that Blacks didn't feel pain like whites, a notion that he may have employed to rationalize and justify using African Americans as guinea pigs.

But even more disturbing, according to findings from a study conducted at the University of Virginia and published in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, a number of laypeople and medical professionals still cling to this and other harmful convictions about biological differences between Blacks and whites. Researchers showed that these false beliefs could predict racial bias in pain assessment and treatment recommendations that shape the way some health care workers perceive and treat African Americans.

Signs posted in the monument's park include more details about what Sims did to the three slave women who helped him blaze new trails in medicine. Claiming that the women, Anarcha, Betsey and Lucy, deserved recognition, activists agitated for the city to erect statues of them to

commemorate the sacrifices they made. Others, such as Harriet Washington, the author of Medical Apartheid, a history of medical experimentation on African Americans, prefer not to support any visuals that symbolize “enslavement and genocide.”

I, for one, wholeheartedly agree with her on this issue.

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